

School Breakfast Program Key to Child Nutrition and Academic Success
Rep. Stephanie Herseth Sandlin

National School Breakfast Week begins March 8th and it's important to recognize and raise awareness of the critical role the School Breakfast Program plays in meeting the nutritional needs of our children. I recently helped serve breakfast at McKinley Elementary School in Pierre and had the opportunity to see the importance of school breakfast to children in South Dakota firsthand. To be sure, the National School Breakfast Program is critical to the success of children across South Dakota and National School Breakfast Week draws attention to this important program.

There's no doubt that a nutritious breakfast is a key ingredient to a productive day, whether you're an adult in the working world or a child preparing for the fun and challenges of school. In fact, research shows that children who eat a good breakfast are more likely to have better nutrition and succeed in school, which can lead to fewer behavioral problems, better attendance, and lower dropout rates. Plus, especially for young children, having a complete, healthy meal in the morning is critical to their early brain development.

Unfortunately, too many children do not get a good breakfast at home and often do not have the option for one at school. And while many may think that issues affecting child nutrition are more prevalent in urban parts of the country, those of us from rural America know that children in South Dakota go hungry every day, affecting their learning, behavior and academic success. In rural states like ours, access to school meals is often a challenge and malnutrition is a very real concern. Many students from across the state face long bus rides every day, often showing up to school with an empty stomach, and therefore less focused as the day begins.

In fact, only about 2 billion school breakfasts are served annually as opposed to 6 billion school lunches. It's unacceptable to allow children to go hungry when we have the resources to provide them with a healthy breakfast option when they arrive at school.

That is why I've introduced the Healthy Start Act, bipartisan legislation to increase access to and participation in the School Breakfast Program. Currently, meals served through the School Lunch Program receive support through the purchase of USDA commodities. However, no commodity assistance is provided for the School Breakfast Program. The Healthy Start Act would for the first time expand commodity assistance to the School Breakfast Program, improving child nutrition and school performance while also supporting agricultural producers across the country.

Providing commodity assistance is a critical component that could help schools who wish to expand or begin a breakfast program, as well as by providing additional healthy food options for children currently in the program. In addition, allowing commodity purchases for the School Breakfast Program also helps our agricultural economy. Farmers across the country play a critical role in providing healthy foods for a variety of nutrition programs, and we must continue to utilize the bounty of our farm and ranches to benefit children in schools across the United States.

In addition to expanding the availability of school breakfast through legislative efforts, I strongly encourage schools and institutions in South Dakota without a School Breakfast Program to reach out to individuals at the Child and Adult Nutrition Services in the South Dakota Department of Education about starting one. In fact, it is possible to start a pilot program at any time during the school year to get a better sense for participation. From what I've been told traveling the state, schools that weren't sure if they would have any participation in a school breakfast program when they first started now don't know how they managed without it.

I commend the work of administrators, parents and educators across South Dakota who work hard every day to meet the nutritional needs of our state's young people. I'm hopeful that with the renewed focus of First Lady Michelle Obama and USDA Secretary Tom Vilsack on improving child nutrition, we will see progress this year in expanding the School Breakfast Program to ensure our children can meet their full potential in school.